

The Times: Hugo Chávez defends the 'bad guys' of the world



Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez tightens bonds with US foes: from Castro to Lukashenka, the influential British newspaper The Times states.

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By Hannah Strange

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President Hugo Chávez has risked international ire by lauding Carlos the Jackal, the Venezuelan terrorist notorious for a series of bombings, kidnappings and hijackings across Europe, as a "revolutionary fighter" unjustly imprisoned for trying to defend the Palestinian people.

The leftist Venezuelan leader praised Carlos – whose real name is Ilich Ramirez Sánchez – as "one of the great fighters of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation", denying he was a terrorist and claiming his lifetime imprisonment in France was unfair.

"I defend him," he said during a speech on Friday night. "It doesn't matter to me what they say tomorrow in Europe."

Ramirez was incarcerated for life in France in 1997 for the 1975 murders of two French secret agents and an alleged informant, after being captured in Sudan three years earlier by French agents acting on a CIA tip and whisked to Paris in a sack. Mr Chávez said that this amounted to "kidnap".

He has admitted to leading a 1975 attack on the Opec headquarters in Vienna that killed 3 people, and has been linked to the 1976 hijacking of an Air France jet en route to Uganda. He is also blamed for a series of bomb attacks in Paris and a grenade attack on the English headquarters of an Israeli bank.

Most famously, it is believed that he was the "godfather" behind the murders of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972.

Ramirez has also expressed support for al-Qaeda and spoken of his "relief" at the 9/11 attacks. It is not the first time that Mr Chávez has waded into controversy over Carlos the Jackal, who retains a small but ardent following in socialist Venezuela.

After taking office in 1999, the former paratrooper provoked international uproar when he wrote to Ramirez in prison, addressing him as "Dear Compatriot", and has previously described him as a friend. Addressing Friday's gathering of socialist politicians from 40 countries, Mr Chávez claimed that Ramirez had paid the price for his defence of the Palestinian cause. "How many Palestinians keep dying?" he added. "They accuse him of being a terrorist, but Carlos really was a revolutionary fighter," he said.

The fiery anti-American leader sought to defend leaders he said were wrongly branded "bad guys", heaping praise on Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who is to visit Venezuela later this week, and the Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe, who he called "brothers".

He drew the wrath of Ugandans after casting doubt on the crimes of the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. "We thought he was a cannibal," said Mr Chávez of Amin, whose regime was notorious for torturing and killing suspected opponents in the 1970s. "I have doubts ... Maybe he was a great nationalist, a

patriot."

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's secretary, Tamale Mirundi, reminded Mr Chávez on Sunday of the brutality of the Amin regime, under which around 300,000 Ugandans died, including one of Mr Mirundi's wives.

Never one to shy away from controversy, Mr Chávez has during his decade in office built up close alliances with foes of Washington around the globe, most famously the former Cuban leader Fidel Castro, whom he regards as his ideological mentor.

He recently hosted Mr Mugabe at a summit on Margarita Island in Venezuela and invited the Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir to Caracas after claiming that the international warrant for his arrest over the genocide in Darfur was based on racism.

He has also forged ties with President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, often said to be Europe's last dictator, and has built a military alliance with Moscow, visiting both countries as part of a recent tour that also included Iran, Syria, Algeria and Libya.